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Gorbachev's New Approach to Conventional Arms Control

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Suddenly everyone's attention has turned toward the heart of the matter: The state of the conventional military balance in Central Europe. For nearly forty years Western Europe's anxieties have centered on the armies of the East amassed across the divide. For all this time Soviet leaders have let West Europeans stew in their fears. Now Mikhail Gorbachev says his country is ready to do something about the problem.

Gorbachev, in fact, has been saying interesting things about a whole range of military and defense issues. Sometimes what he urges seems farfetched and maybe even propagandistic, such as his insistence that all nuclear weapons can and should be eliminated within a matter of years. So, too, his startling proposition that deterrence as such is a pernicious concept, because it rationalizes the accumulation of nuclear weapons. Not only is it folly, he contends, to think that any general war, least of all a nuclear war, can be won. It is equally foolhardy to assume, as Western leaders do, that nuclear weapons can help to keep the peace by deterring aggression. Nuclear weapons, he insists, beget nuclear weapons.

At other times, his innovations are more compelling, such as the fresh way that he discusses national security. According to Gorbachev, a nation's security cannot rest only on military might, because so many threats to a country's well-being are economic and political, against which arms offer no protection. It is time to stop conceiving national security in preeminently military terms and placing excessive

faith in military power. Moreover, unlike any of his predecessors, he has introduced the new theme that no nation's security should be achieved at the expense of another's; national security presupposes mutual security. "To think otherwise," he told Soviet television viewers in August, 1986, "is to live in a world of illusions, in a world of self-deception."¹

From here, he has gone on to other less abstract new ideas, such as "reasonable sufficiency" as a guideline to military spending. The notion appears for the first time in his report to the Twenty-Seventh Party Congress, February, 1986, and has come to suggest a more modest alternative basis for designing Soviet defenses. Rather than keeping up with the Joneses in every sphere of military competition, Gorbachev seems to be saying, the Soviet Union should stop when it is confident that it can ensure the performance of essential defense tasks. To do more is to play into the hands of an adversary who counts on sapping Soviet economic strength by sucking the Soviet Union into an open-ended arms competition.²

There are other straws in the wind: Talk of strategic stability as a new goal for which the superpowers should strive, complemented by efforts on the part of Gorbachev's academic allies to spell out what that might entail; attempts to generalize to other areas of military competition the wisdom of the Soviet interim decision to cope with the American Strategic Defense Initiative by offsetting rather than imitating it; and the new approach to old Soviet rigidities, such as

¹ *Izvestiya*, August 19, 1986, p. 1.

² See, for example, his speech to the 18th Conference of Trade Unions, *Pravda*, February 26, 1987, p. 3.



the acceptance of on-site verification for nuclear arms control and the scrapping of whole categories of Soviet missile systems. But the development that overshadows all of these new hope-giving trends is Gorbachev's hint of a Soviet readiness to reconsider the conventional arms balance in Central Europe.

If Gorbachev has concluded that Soviet interests can be better served by rethinking his country's approach to war in Europe, he is stepping up to the core problem of the postwar East-West military competition. Were the Soviet Union to engage in coming years in a good-faith effort to refashion the conventional balance in Europe, particularly in Central Europe, the contest between East and West would be fundamentally altered.

The Roots of the Problem

To understand why this is so, one must return to the essence of the problem. Originally the Western alliance, faced with large numbers of Soviet troops across the Elbe, resolved to deal with the problem in kind. In Lisbon in 1952, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization committed itself to raising a massive conventional force of seventy divisions as a counterpoise to the eighty to ninety divisions the Soviet Union had in Eastern Europe and the Western USSR. NATO never came close to achieving this goal, and soon settled for a nuclear shortcut. Early in the Eisenhower administration, defense planners seized on tactical nuclear weapons as a suitable substitute for the missing men in arms. A few years later they would add plans to emplace longer-range nuclear systems in Europe, both as a direct deterrent to conventional attack and as a link to America's nuclear arsenal.

In effect, the Western Alliance in the 1950s ceded conventional superiority to the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies, accepting a second-best response. NATO's nuclear deterrent, meaning primarily the nuclear weapons of the United States, was made to bear a heavy burden. Not only was it assigned the task of deterring the Soviet Union from resorting to the use of nuclear weapons and, failing that, of compelling the Soviet leadership to desist as quickly as possible, it was also expected to ensure that Moscow would never dare to attack with conventional arms in the first place.

Not surprisingly, whenever developments promised to dampen the willingness of U.S. leaders to follow through, the Europeans would invariably begin

agonizing over their vulnerability to Soviet conventional might. It happened initially in the late 1950s, when the Soviets tested their first intercontinental ballistic missile, eliminating America's relative safety from nuclear annihilation and raising the specter that a U.S. president would refuse to see his land devastated even if Soviet armies were moving against Western Europe. A surge of the same uneasiness occurred in the late 1970s, when Americans and Europeans persuaded themselves that the Soviet Union would soon be in a position, should war come, to gut the most important element in the U.S. retaliatory force, land-based ballistic missiles. More recently the agreement to eliminate short- and intermediate-range nuclear missiles from Europe — weapons seen as bolstering a weakening U.S. nuclear guarantee — has, again, stirred concern over Soviet conventional superiority.

Superiority, however, is a vague notion. To understand where the roots of the problem are, one must be clear about the kind of superiority that counts. That which matters most is not the Soviet Union's raw quantitative superiority, although naturally people worry when Warsaw Pact personnel exceed NATO's by 1.7 times, its main battle tanks by 2.5 times, its artillery by 2.7 times, and its attack helicopters by 3.3 times.

Were a war to be fought, its course would depend on a great many factors missing from even the most complete weapons inventory, such as the morale of troops, the quality of weaponry, geographical advantage, and the underlying economic strength and social cohesion of society. No one has yet devised a matrix permitting all the determinants of war's outcome to be measured, but there are indexes that tell more than crude weapons counts — for example, the aggregate firepower of the two alliances' armies. Because this index reflects the capacity of one side to deliver munitions against targets of the other, it presumably would be a decisive element in war. By this standard the Warsaw Pact is usually thought to have at least a 1.2:1 advantage at the outset of hostilities, an advantage that increases as each side moves to reinforce its forces.³

But comparisons based on so-called force-to-space ratios are also likely to be crucial predictors of success and failure. The term refers to the advantage required by attacking forces in order to prevail along a given sector of the front. Because there is only so much force that can be usefully concentrated in a finite space

³ For a convenient summary of this and the next comparison, see Jack Snyder, "The Gorbachev Revolution: Limiting Offensive Conventional Forces in Europe," *International Security* (forthcoming Spring 1988).

and the defending side does not have to match this force to withstand the blow, evaluations featuring this criterion ordinarily suggest that NATO's situation is better than often assumed.

In the end, however, the problems posed for the West by all of these comparisons derive from a single central reality, namely, the offensive posture of the East. Many interlaced elements create this reality. It starts with the determination of the Soviet leadership to fight the next war on the soil of the other side: a goal that places a premium on a blitzkrieg-style military strategy that would have Warsaw Pact forces smash through NATO's forward defenses and pour into the interior, swiftly enveloping and destroying NATO's nuclear forces, air bases, and the infrastructure for reinforcing the men and materiel on the front lines. This strategy in turn leads the Soviets to concentrate on weapons necessary to succeed, such as armor and artillery, and to deploy these weapons in a comparatively large number of combat divisions. For the world to change, it is this reality that Soviet leaders must be prepared to amend.

Gorbachev's New Rhetoric

Until spring 1986, precious little indicated any such possibility. For thirteen years, going back to early 1973, East and West had negotiated without much effect in the so-called Mutual and Balanced Force Reduction (MBFR) talks in Vienna. Throughout this time the Soviets showed no sign of a willingness to redesign the basic structure of the military balance in Central Europe, insisting all along that any reductions would have to preserve the existing balance.

Then sometime in the early months of 1986, Gorbachev appears to have begun entertaining a different approach. As late as January, 1986, in his visionary speech on disarmament, Gorbachev had nothing new to say about conventional arms control. But in April, at the 11th East German party congress, he spoke of the "confrontation on the [European] continent of mighty armed forces outfitted with conventional arms," arms whose "modern combat characteristics are drawing closer to systems of mass annihilation." He proposed that something be done to break out of the sterile and deadlocked MBFR framework by extending the geographic zone of reduction to all of Europe, "from the Atlantic to the Urals."⁴ In June, 1986, the Budapest

proposal of the Warsaw Pact urged the elimination of weapons particularly useful in surprise attack. A month later, during Francois Mitterrand's visit to Moscow, Gorbachev referred to West European fears of the Soviet Union's conventional superiority and said: "Let us look at all of this in a new way. For those types of weapons in which the West has more, let it make the corresponding reductions, and for those in which we have more, we will unhesitatingly eliminate this 'surplus.' In other words, let us look for balance at a lower level."⁵

At the International Forum in February 1987, he tied all these elements together and went one step beyond. "Take all our proposals," he began. "There are no weapons of ours that are not subject to negotiations."⁶ "Our principle is simple: All armaments should be limited and reduced . . . If there is any imbalance, we must restore the balance not by letting the one short of some elements build them up, but by having the one with more of them scale them down." Then he went on, "It is important, in our view, while lowering the level of military confrontation, to carry through such measures as would make it possible to lessen, or better still, altogether exclude the possibility of surprise attack." And he added, introducing a new phrase: "The most dangerous *kinds of offensive weapons* must be removed from the zone of contact." (My emphasis)

In early May, General Wojciech Jaruzelski presented Poland's plan for European arms control, and, in addition to many of the elements earlier introduced by Gorbachev, he included a proposal to render military doctrine less menacing, that is, less offensively oriented. The Warsaw Pact Political Consultative Committee then accepted the same notion at a meeting in June. Subsequently, spokesmen for Jaruzelski have made it plain that he has in mind revising operational doctrine (that is, the strategy by which a war would be fought), not the foggier and more hortatory concept of political-military doctrine (that is, the guidelines determining when and why a war would be fought), which by Soviet definition has always been defensive in the Warsaw Pact's case. Gorbachev, too, has acknowledged the need to reconsider military strategy as part of the arms control process in Europe. In his book *Perestroika*, he writes that "it is time the two military alliances amended their strategic concepts to gear them more to the aims of defense."⁷ And, he adds, there must

⁴ See his speech in *Pravda*, April 19, 1986, p. 2.

⁵ *Pravda*, July 8, 1986, p. 2.

⁶ *Pravda*, February 17, 1987, p. 3.

⁷ Mikhail Gorbachev, *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), p. 208.

be "a change in the entire pattern of armed forces with a view to imparting an exclusively defensive character to them."

By summer, 1987, Gorbachev had distilled from all of this a single central proposition. At each crucial level of the military balance, including Europe, he began saying, the two sides should have armed forces only adequate for defending against possible aggression, not forces permitting either side to carry out offensive operations against the other.

Meanwhile, Gorbachev's rhetorical departures have stirred an interest among a variety of civilian analysts and policymakers. A number of them have eagerly seized on his remarks to advocate a whole new approach to conventional defense in Central Europe. Many of these people come from the ranks of specialists on strategic nuclear issues, and have previously cared little about the character and evolution of the conventional military competition.⁸ Two of them, for example, in a now famous August, 1987 article, take few pains to conceal the revolution they seek.⁹ As they say, "Conventional military forces must be lowered to a level of reasonable sufficiency, that is to a level essential for solving only defensive tasks." Operational doctrine, they say, should be genuinely defensive, which in turn requires adjustments in the "numbers, structures, armaments, and deployments of forces, in troop training and military exercises, and in military planning." To move in this direction, they bluntly note, "certain changes will have to occur in the way military professionals think."¹⁰ They will have to "reconsider a number of widely held postulates of military theory and practice," including above all else the notion that "only 'an all-out offensive leads to victory.'"

Journals, like *New Times*, have gone out of their way to publish thought-provoking items. Sometimes it is a round-table with civilian military experts making the most of Gorbachev's themes. At other times it is an interview with a Western advocate of "non-provocative defense," such as retired British military officer

Michael Harbottle, who then lays out in some detail the kind of changes that would be required of the Soviet Union.¹¹

Even Soviet officials have seemed eager to give Gorbachev's formulas a push forward. In September, 1987, before the U.N. General Assembly, Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze strongly endorsed the need to move toward military doctrines of an "exclusively defensive character," and added the notion that all sides should "adopt the principles of non-offensive defense."¹² A month later, the head of the foreign Ministry's arms control department, Viktor Karpov, repeated Gorbachev's exhortation to reduce military force on both sides to a level where neither could move offensively against the other. He then went on to suggest that this might be accomplished by "scrapping nuclear weapons and by reducing the most dangerous types of arms, which could include tanks, tactical aircraft, and strike helicopters."¹³

At last month's summit meeting in Washington, Gorbachev raised the issue to a new level of priority. At his closing press conference, he dwelled on the issue as never before. Not only did he give it only a fraction less attention than the centerpiece of the summit — strategic arms control — he drew direct parallels between the two areas.¹⁴ He suggested that the kind of dramatic breakthrough sought at Reykjavik a year ago might be profitably imitated in the conventional field. He urged that one not wait for a fully sketched scheme of reductions to begin, but that the two sides proceed in phases, doing as much as one could as soon as one could. And he assured his listeners that the Soviet Union was ready to make the most far-reaching adjustments in its forces.

Complications

Two very major qualifications, however, need to be introduced, which together make the consummation of the new trends anything but sure. First, there is the condition of Gorbachev's own thinking. Neither he nor

8 See, for example, A.G. Arbatov, A.A. Vasilev, A.A. Kokoshin, "Yadernoe oruzhie i strategicheskaya stabilnost," *SSHA*, no. 10 (October 1987), pp. 17-24; Vitaly Zhurkin, Sergei Karaganov, Andrei Kortunov, "Reasonable Sufficiency," *New Times*, no. 40 (October 12, 1987), pp. 13-15; Roald Sagdeev and Andrei Kokoshin, eds., "Strategic Stability under Conditions of Radical Nuclear Arms Reductions," (Moscow, forthcoming); V. Petrovskii, "Sovetskaya kontseptsiya vseobshchei bezopasnosti," *Mirovaya ekonomika i mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya* (MEMO), no. 6 (June, 1986), pp. 3-13, and by the same author, "Doverie i vyzhivanie chelovechestva," *MEMO*, no. 11 (November, 1987), pp. 15-26.

9 A. Kokoshin and V. Larionov, "Kurskaya bitva v svete sovremennoi oboronitelnoi doktriny," *MEMO*, no. 8 (August, 1987), p. 32. Dr. Kokoshin, one of the deputy directors of the Institute of the USA and Canada, is also a deputy chairman of the Velikhov Commission. General Larionov had a substantial role in drafting the Sokolovsky volumes on military strategy in the 1960s.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 33.

11 For an illustration of the first, see "Of Reasonable Sufficiency, Precarious Parity, and International Security," *New Times*, no. 27 (July 13, 1987), pp. 18-21, and for the second *New Times*, no. 18 (May 11, 1987), pp. 20-21.

12 See *Pravda*, September 25, 1987, p. 4.

13 Viktor Karpov, TASS, October 12, 1987; Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report, Soviet Union, October 13, 1987, pp. 4-5, as cited by Snyder, "The Gorbachev Revolution."

14 See *Pravda*, December 11, 1987.

any other part of the Soviet establishment has yet begun to give content to his sweeping new language. Almost certainly neither he nor they have more than the most inchoate notion of how the Soviet Union would go about translating its current military posture into a demonstrably defensive one. Nor have they begun turning the rhetoric of the past year into a practical arms control negotiating program. Gorbachev's few forays into the realm of the specific have been off-handed and fragmentary.

In September, for instance, he referred to the removal of nuclear and other offensive arms from the borders where the Warsaw Pact confronts NATO and the creation of demilitarized zones.¹⁵ Apart from its imprecision, the idea evokes schemes floated by Soviet representatives within the Palme Commission and in the dialogue with various parties of the European left, suggestions that have not stirred much enthusiasm elsewhere in Europe. He returned to the same notion in his press conference after the Washington summit, but then hinted that a more productive arrangement might be a tradeoff between the Warsaw Pact's larger number of main battle tanks and NATO's advantage in deep-interdiction aircraft, and then a few minutes later he implied that it would make sense to address the asymmetries in geographical terms — NATO's superiority on Europe's southern flank weighed against the Warsaw Pact's upper hand farther north. Similarly, other Soviet commentators have left a trail of scattered, inconsistent, and not altogether encouraging specifics. All manner of tradeoffs are hinted at, but often the combination of weapons to be reduced makes no sense. Either the result would weaken defense on both sides more than offense or would leave NATO, in particular, in an even more precarious position.

The second qualification gives still greater reason for pause. Whatever may be the half-formed character of Gorbachev's ideas, it appears that the Soviet military have as yet hardly begun to move in the same direction. If Gorbachev and many of his foreign policy advisors in principle now accept the need to reshape the conventional balance in Europe, what is coming from the military looks quite different. From all appearances, they continue to believe in past policy and to harbor a notion of threat that, if anything, requires a greater na-

tional effort. What they write seems at odds with Gorbachev's formulas, even at times a deliberate refashioning of his meaning.

Gorbachev portrays a Europe ripe for arms control; Soviet military leaders, starting with Marshal Akhromeev, harp on a different reality — on a NATO adversary "preparing for an extended conventional war using new systems of armaments," ready to launch a "surprise attack" and "massive military operations," swiftly "extended throughout the depth of Soviet territory and that of its allies."¹⁶ This is hardly an adversary on the defensive, intimidated, and in need of reassurance through arms control. On the contrary, it is a superbly well-armed foe, increasingly committed to offensive doctrines of its own, such as Air-Land Battle.

Where Gorbachev and the civilians stress the notion of "reasonable sufficiency," the Soviet military substitutes "defense sufficiency," a concept that sets a considerably higher defense requirement.¹⁷ Defense sufficiency, writes Akhromeev, is not something that should be interpreted "one-sidedly, or without regard for the prevailing correlation of forces."¹⁸ Even less should it allow for "unilateral disarmament or a unilateral reduction of our defense forces." On the contrary, sufficiency is having forces, both in quantity and quality, that are fully commensurate with "the level of military threat." As another senior military figure puts it, "The bounds of sufficiency for defense and for repelling aggression are defined not by us but by the actions of the United States and NATO."¹⁹ When Akhromeev makes the same point, he specifically cites the West's striving for superiority as the source of the difficulty.

Where Gorbachev and the others concede the importance of moving to defensive operational doctrine, the Soviet military claims already to have it. General Gribkov, for example, speaks of Warsaw Pact forces readied for "retaliation," possessing arms sufficient only for "defense and for rebuffing potential aggression." Akhromeev flatly asserts that the "defensive character of the Warsaw Pact's doctrine extends in equal measure not only to its political but to its military-technical side."²⁰ And then both men go on to stress that the Soviet Union's defensive posture "scar-

15 This is contained in his much-noted article on revitalizing the UN System. See *Pravda*, September 17, 1987, p. 2.

16 See Marshal Sergei Akhromeev, "Doktrina predotvrashcheniya voyny, zashchity mira i sotsializma," *Problemy mira i sotsializma*, no. 12 (December 1987), p. 24.

17 Akhromeev, for example, throughout the previously cited article uses only the phrase "oboronnaya dostatochnost" (defense sufficiency), never the phrase "razumnaya dostatochnost" (reasonable sufficiency).

18 *Ibid.*, p. 26.

19 Interview with the Chief of the Warsaw Pact, General A.I. Gribkov, *Krasnaya zvezda*, September 25, 1987, p. 3.

20 Akhromeev, "Doktrina," p. 26.

cely signifies that the Warsaw Pact only intends to repulse passively the blows of the enemy." On the contrary, if aggression is committed, it will invite "crushing retaliatory blows," delivered with "maximum decisiveness and activity."²¹

Do these striking differences represent open discord between the Soviet military and political leadership? And, if so, what effect is the disagreement likely to have on the Soviet willingness to engage NATO in a serious effort to restructure the conventional balance in Central Europe? It would be a mistake to jump to conclusions. Rather than inferring conflict from these discrepancies, the outsider would be wiser to assume that nothing yet exists over which to quarrel. Because Gorbachev and his allies have not given content to their ideas, the military remains unchallenged. Indeed, they are left to make of the new language whatever they choose. Neither part of the leadership has begun to engage the other.

Sooner or later, if the political leadership moves to give content to its ideas — tries to reshape doctrine, deployments, and hardware in Central Europe — and the military remains wedded to the old concepts and posture, then a conflict looms. But this struggle may never materialize. For there is already nuance in the military leadership's position. While the accent in Akhromeev and the others' interviews and articles contrasts with Gorbachev's, somewhere in everything issued by the military appear traces of the General Secretary's new thinking. Akhromeev, for example, embraces the notion that both East and West should have only the capacity to defend, not the means to launch a surprise attack or to carry out large-scale offensive operations. And he comes back to the notion a second time in an arms control context, endorsing it as the aim of Warsaw Pact policy.²² He also repeats another Gorbachev formula, according to which the persistent upward thrust of the arms race threatens to reach a point where strategic parity no longer reinforces deterrence.

More importantly, the military, for their own reasons, are beginning to question many aspects of prevailing doctrine. The changing character of the modern battlefield, the emergence of new technologies calling into question the primacy of the tank, and NATO's own evolution toward more offensive strategies are forcing the General Staff's shrewdest

strategists to think long and hard about the war of tomorrow. How they eventually choose to respond to the *military* challenge may not be utterly at loggerheads with the kind of posture Gorbachev and his supporters may begin insisting on for *political* reasons. At the moment, the tendency appears to be to seek ways of retaining the initiative by exploiting new technologies, and conducting as much offense as possible.²³ But there are those on the Soviet side who believe that these trends will eventually lead to a greater emphasis on strategic (conventional) defense, not as a momentary consolidation before going over to the offensive, but as an alternative defense posture. If so, Gorbachev and his sympathizers will have less trouble selling the Soviet General Staff on the merit of depriving both alliances of their most potent offensive capabilities.

Andrei Kokoshin and General Larionov use the World War II Battle of Kursk to argue that defense has in the past not only proved itself more economical but, through the concentration of fire and the use of artificial obstacles, such as anti-tank mines, has demonstrated the "possibility of achieving maximum advantage" and withstanding "the mightiest armored thrusts."²⁴ Larionov fought, as a young commander, in the Battle of Kursk and has given a great deal of thought to understanding its meaning. Kokoshin and Larionov are not only recasting the history of the battle that has most shaped postwar Soviet thinking. They are using history to justify a fundamental shift in the Soviet approach to conventional arms. Many officers of Larionov's generation are likely to resist, convinced that they know first hand how wars are fought. But already there are younger officers who sense the decrepitude in Soviet military thinking, and who eagerly seek venues for exploring a more modern vision of warfare.²⁵

They will be helped by a variety of civilian analysts, some of whom work closely with parts of the Soviet military establishment. These analysts are just beginning to develop frameworks by which the hard issues of conventional force restructuring can be judged. In the Velikhov Commission, the assemblage of scientists and analysts that has done much to shape the Soviet response to the Strategic Defense Initiative, work has started on alternative conventional arms regimes. Karpov's arms control department in the Foreign Ministry is beginning to address the problem.

21 The quote is from *ibid.*, pp. 26-27, but the same point appears in Gribkov's interview as well.

22 *Ibid.*, pp. 27 and 28.

23 See Snyder, "The Gorbachev Revolution."

24 Kokoshin and Larionov, "Kurskaya bitva," p. 32.

25 This comment and those which follow in the next paragraph are based on a series of conversations in New York, Washington and Moscow, with a number of Soviets who are participants in or close observers of the process underway.

Even the small arms control sectors within the Central Committee's International and Propaganda Departments, both of them under the direction of senior military officers, are likely to weigh in. Sections within the Institute of World Economy and International Politics and the Institute of the USA and Canada, which enjoy close working relations with Karpov's department and parts of the defense establishment, are also gearing up to shape the discussion. Many — indeed, most — of these people accept the need to adjust the Soviet Union's traditional approach to the conventional balance in Europe and the wisdom of a more unambiguously defensive Warsaw Pact posture.

Gorbachev's Motives

It is, of course, Gorbachev and policymakers at his level who will determine whether anything comes of the new talk. They, if they choose, will be the ones to bring matters to a head, to give the new concepts real currency, to decide how and when to translate theory into something concrete. Thus, it is important to understand what lies behind their interest in sounding the new themes. Why is Gorbachev at last talking about a redefinition of the conventional military balance in Europe?

There are several possible answers to the question. First, Gorbachev may be cynical. He may be raising the topic only to sow confusion within the Western alliance, hoping to stimulate complacency among the European and American publics and to help lower their guard at a time when the removal of nuclear weapons from Europe is enhancing the weight of Soviet conventional military power. Explained in this fashion, Gorbachev's words are a subterfuge intended to complement the steps already taken toward a denuclearized Europe, in which Soviet conventional power will stand still more starkly supreme.

Second, Gorbachev may be sincere about conventional arms control and the restructuring of the balance but for cynical ends. In fact, he may plan to stress tradeoffs enhancing the Soviet Union's existing advantage. The right kind of constraints on new technologies or on weapons favoring NATO, such as tactical aircraft, could add to Soviet superiority. By this reasoning, Gorbachev seeks not so much to improve the Central European balance as to aggrandize Soviet military power.

But other explanations also are possible. Some observers would argue that Gorbachev's motives are sincere but extrinsic to arms control; that he genuinely desires a reduction of the military confrontation in Central Europe in order to draw down Soviet commitments in East Germany and to transfer scarce resources to urgent domestic economic needs. Given the deep-seated economic difficulties facing him at home, the thought that Gorbachev seeks relief wherever he can find it does not seem farfetched. Were he able to demobilize a large fraction of the twenty divisions currently deployed in East Germany, the gains to his modernization program would be sizable.

A fourth and final explanation seems to me the most compelling. Accordingly, what has finally brought Gorbachev around to the problem of the conventional force balance is a recognition that, unless he faces up to it, he cannot have the nuclear arms control regime that he wants. At a minimum, he cannot hope to rid Europe of nuclear weapons, which he has set as a goal, without at least making some gesture to reassure the West Europeans. Possibly the impulse is grander still. Gorbachev may be the first Soviet leader to comprehend the integral link between the state of the conventional balance in Europe and the larger nuclear competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. Controlling the next surge in nuclear technology, including the array of weapons systems likely to benefit from the American SDI program, will obviously depend on the progress the two sides achieve in constraining long-range offensive (nuclear) forces. Henceforth, however, any such constraints are increasingly caught up with the question of conventional arms control. More and more voices in both Europe and the United States express unease over the prospect of cutting deeply into the American nuclear deterrent, while nothing has been done to ease the threat from the conventional military balance.

"Lowering the level of military confrontation and reinforcing stability in the sphere of conventional military forces, particularly in Europe," Kokoshin and Larionov write, "are essential conditions for deep cuts in nuclear arms" and for achieving a stable "military-strategic equilibrium" at a lower level.²⁶ Gorbachev, at the summit, spoke even more to the point.²⁷ Success in eliminating INF and progress on strategic arms control had brought East and West inevitably to the question of conventional armaments. The more nuclear arms control advanced, he suggested, the more important be-

²⁶ Kokoshin and Larionov, "Kurskaya bitva," p. 32.

²⁷ *Pravda*, December 11, 1987.

came the other matter. He even referred to conventional arms control as assuming "pride of place."

The Challenge for the United States

Conventional arms control is upon us, no matter how ill-prepared both East and West are to deal with it. In the coming decade, the issue is likely to dominate the arms control agenda as much as limiting nuclear weapons. Unhappily, it is also likely to be a considerably more complex and unwieldy task. The numbers of participants, weapons systems, spatial dimensions, apples and oranges vastly exceed those grappled with in either INF or START. The politics of the issue within and between alliances make those of the other two negotiations seem easy.

Add to that several further disadvantages. First, there exists almost no advanced thinking on which the two sides can lean in launching the process. Little of the intellectual capital accumulated before strategic arms control got underway in 1969 has any parallel in the sphere of conventional arms control. Fourteen years of MBFR negotiations have deadened the mind to the possibilities of a major restructuring of the military balance, and, until recently, no part of the university or research world in either country had stepped in to fill the breach.

Second, the complexity of the issue means that even like-minded negotiators of great good will would have a devilishly difficult time designing a regime with enhanced security all around. As Jack Snyder and others have argued, any number of tradeoffs would lead to a less favorable *ex ante* situation. Or, as he notes, arrangements meeting one set of criteria would do damage according to another. "For example, trading ten [Warsaw] Pact Armored-Division Equivalents for five NATO ADEs would improve the firepower balance, but it would be ruinous from the standpoint of NATO's force-to-space ratio. Similarly, banning long-range fighter bombers would reduce incentives to preempt in the air war, but it would throw away a NATO advantage without receiving adequate compensation."²⁸

Third, great potential discord exists within the Western Alliance over the future of conventional arms control. The French, both inside and outside govern-

ment, mistrust further arms control focused on Europe, for fear that it will only add pressure to denuclearize the continent completely. Conventional arms control, because it will doubtless evoke the problem of battlefield nuclear weapons, seems to them a perilous enterprise, all the more because by definition it does not affect the vast arsenal of strategic nuclear weapons retained by the Soviet Union.

The Germans are likely to welcome the chance to do away with battlefield nuclear weapons, since their country is to be the battlefield, but they are divided even within their government over how boldly to pursue the conventional arms-control option. And the Americans are likely to argue among themselves and with their allies over how much to make future strategic arms accords hostage to a lumbering, intractable conventional arms control process.

Finally, the Soviet side is not yet in any position to negotiate seriously, since it has only begun to think through the issue. Over the next year or two, Soviet initiatives are likely to be tactical holding operations, masking the absence of a well-thought-out set of objectives and a strategy to go with. Even seemingly bold steps — say, were the Soviets to withdraw unilaterally an impressive number of tanks from Eastern Europe — would not substitute for the hard rethinking that must still be done in Moscow before the process can advance.

Nonetheless, for all the difficulty that lies ahead, a historic opportunity may now be taking shape. If, as mounting evidence suggests, Gorbachev has accepted in principle the need to do something about conventional forces in Europe, creative leadership in the United States and West Germany may find him willing to begin the long, arduous process of reconceiving the Soviet approach to war in Europe. It will not happen tomorrow. But for the first time in forty years, a serious effort to engage the Soviet leadership in transforming the military confrontation in Central Europe has a chance of succeeding.

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